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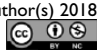

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Abstract

This article seeks to trouble the concept of "family" for young people who have been in out-of-home care, by reflecting on the continuing significance (and troubles) of family relationships beyond childhood. The analysis draws on two cross-national studies in Europe: *Beyond Contact*, which examined policies and systems for work with families of children in care, and *Against All Odds?*, a qualitative longitudinal study of young adults who have been in care. Policy discourses that reify and instrumentalize the concept of family—for example, through the language of "contact," "reunification," and "permanence"—neglect the complex temporality of "family" for young people who have been in care, negotiated and practiced across time and in multiple (and changing) care contexts, and forming part of complex, dynamic and relational identities, and understandings of "belonging" for young adults who have been in care.

Keywords

family theory, family practices, care leavers, intergenerational, public care, family policy

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Introduction

This article draws together reflections on the meanings of "family" that arise from two research projects, both of which were concerned with children and young people who are (or have been) "in care," in out-of-home placement. Both are cross-national studies in Europe, but in focus and methodology they are quite different. The first, *Beyond Contact*, studied policy approaches to work with families of children in care in England, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands, and is used to contextualize analysis conducted for the second, *Against All Odds?*, which is an ongoing qualitative longitudinal study in Norway, Denmark, and England, studying the experiences of young adults who have been "in care." Both studies adopt a cross-country comparative approach while recognizing that even superficially similar or geographically proximate countries will differ in contexts such as population demography, overarching policy objectives, and understandings of the role of the state in child and family lives (Hantrais, 2009). By considering the studies together, it is possible to consider how policy framings of "family" for children in care relate to narratives of lived experience for young people themselves, in order to trouble the concept and discourses of "family," highlighting the multiple and complex ways in which "family" is negotiated and practiced across time.

Theorizing "Family"

In the United Kingdom, policies for children and families, and the research on which those policies are based, have tended to privilege a white middle-class heteronormative ideal type (e.g., Edwards, McCarthy, & Gillies, 2012; Phoenix, 1987). Such "normative" conceptualizations are not politically neutral; the ideal type of the family has a long history of political recruitment to the argument that "social problems disappeared when the family was strong and effective" (Lewis 1994, p. 51). Contemporary neoliberal political discourses rely on binarizing contrasts drawn between good and bad families. The distinctions drawn between "ordinary" families and those defined as troubled, feckless or "revolting" contribute to a "cultural political economy of disgust" (Jensen & Tyler, 2015, p. 480), which individualizes risk and neglects the impact of poverty and widening social inequalities on child and family welfare (Featherstone, Gupta, Morris, & Warner, 2018). Mothers in particular are responsibilized for child outcomes, through discourses of "good enough" parenting that promote corrective (rather than emancipatory or rights-based approaches) to parent and family support (e.g., Boddy, 2013; Gillies, Edwards, & Horsley, 2017).

Binarizing typologies are politically *and* conceptually problematic, reifying "family" in ways that belie the complex heterogeneity and dynamic fluidity of family forms, relationships, and practices. So-called "normal" or "ordinary" families also experience troubles, just as the "normal" features in the everyday lives of families who have "troubles" (McCarthy, Hooper, & Gillies, 2013). Moreover, as eloquently demonstrated in Ridge's (2009, p. 34) research with low-income families in the United Kingdom, children are not merely the recipients of parenting, but are "key contributors to family life, playing an important role in mediating and managing the experience of poverty." In sum, as Morgan (2011) observed:

> To write of "The Family" was to give it a thing-like quality [that fails] to do justice to the range of positions (or "roles") associated with the family and the different ways in which these might be interpreted or enacted. (p. 3)

Concern about the normative implications of reifying "the family" has led some researchers to argue for a move away from the concept, for example, toward a focus on "personal life," kinship or intimate relationships (e.g., Smart, 2011). As Smart (2011, p. 17) notes, thinking about *relationality* allows that relating is active: relationships are not "simply given (and hence unchanging) through one's position in a family genealogy." But recognition of the dynamic nature of family practices and family relationships does not negate the value of attention to "family." Rather, "family" remains an important concept for policy, precisely *because* of the meanings we attach to family (in all its diversity) within relational practices and identities, in everyday lives *and* over the life course (e.g., Edwards et al., 2012; Finch & Mason, 1993; McCarthy et al., 2013). McCarthy (2012, pp. 70-71) observes that everyday meanings of "family" "may convey idealized or (sometimes, but less commonly) vilified understandings of 'family,'" but there remains a need to attend to "what is being evoked in the relational language of family togetherness." She calls for recognition of the multiple meanings of "family," meanings that are rooted in shared memories, and a sense of belonging and of connected selves. As Morgan (2011) writes, attention to family and family practices also illuminates the ways in which temporality and spatiality intertwine, as history and biography link across generations and through the life course, connecting in turn with quotidian and habitual family practices which are situated in the "practical" time and space of everyday lives. Finch's (2007) concept of family display is also helpful here, in articulating the ways that

> individuals, and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute "doing family things" and thereby confirm that these relationships are "family" relationships. (p. 66)

Practices of family display—including talk—thus provide a sense of connection and belonging which travels through time and across generations, beyond the sense of being an "individual," and connecting individual and family identity.

With the above arguments in mind, the problematic reification of the so-called "ordinary family" can be addressed without abandoning the concept of family. By attending to meanings of family for marginalized and stigmatized groups within society (Edwards et al., 2012; Wilson, Cunningham-Burley, Bancroft, & Backett-Milburn, 2012), it should be possible to challenge policy discourses that rely on "impoverished stories about family life" (Smart, 2011, p. 16), constructed in opposition to the imaginary of an "ordinary" other. The analysis presented in this article aims to contribute to that agenda, and so seeks to highlight the importance of attention to "family," in all its dynamic multidimensional complexity, in policies for children in care and young adults who have been in care. In the field of child welfare, cross-national research has highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging and connectedness for young people in and leaving care (see Ward, 2011, for a review). But this literature raises two pivotal questions that depend on understandings of "family": What forms of connectedness are supported in policy and practice; and how are belonging and connectedness experienced over time by young people themselves?

The Studies

Beyond Contact

Funded by the Nuffield Foundation, the focus of *Beyond Contact* was on work with families of children who live in placements away from their birth parents, through voluntary or court ordered arrangements, commonly referred to as "in care." The research examined policy approaches to work with birth families in four countries—England, Denmark, France, and the Netherlands—chosen to exemplify different welfare approaches and systems for work with children in care and their families (see Boddy et al., 2013, 2014). The aim was to identify areas for shared learning with the potential to inform policy and practice development in England. In each country, the research team conducted: a documentary review of published policy and legislative documents, national statistics (where available), and academic and "gray" literature; telephone interviews with six senior stakeholders, representing policy, service provider, and academic perspectives; and stakeholder discussion forums, to provide an additional stage of "check and challenge" on the critical analyses emerging from the country reports and cross-national analysis. The study has

been reported in detail elsewhere (Boddy et al., 2013, 2014) and is discussed only briefly here, with key information updated where appropriate, to contextualize a more detailed discussion of interviews with young adults in England who took part in *Against All Odds?* Brannen (2002, as cited in Phoenix, 2014, p. 115) draws attention to the "particularity of the historical periods" within which research is conducted; policy approaches form part of that historical particularity, as do the normative understandings of family against which the young adults in *Against All Odds?* reflect on their lives.

Against All Odds?

Against All Odds? is an ongoing study involving Norway, Denmark, and England, funded by the Research Council of Norway and led by Elisabeth Backe-Hansen (see Authors' Note and Funding). The research sets out to understand what "doing well" means for young adults who have experienced out of home placement, against the context of a substantial international literature on risk of disadvantage for young adult care leavers (e.g., Stein & Munro, 2008). The study combines secondary analysis of national administrative data; in-depth qualitative longitudinal research with care leavers in each country; and a cross-national documentary review of relevant legislation and policy frameworks which are pertinent to the situation of care experienced by young people as they make transitions out of child welfare services. This article draws on qualitative data from interviews in England, conducted with ethics approval from the University of Sussex (ER/JMB55/2).

In total, 21 young adults (aged 16-32 years) took part in England, recruited through sources including nongovernmental organizations that support and advocate for children in care and care leavers, local authority leaving care services and "Children in Care Councils," and through publicity on social media (Twitter and a Facebook group for care leavers). This range of recruitment strategies enhanced diversity (including geographical spread) within the sample. We did not seek to construct a sample that would be representative of the heterogeneous population of young adults who have experienced care but it must be recognized that participants were willing to identify as care leavers and as "doing well." All participants were in education, training, or employment (full-time or part-time) when they started the study.

The methodological approach was designed to avoid the "enforced narrative" of a life constructed in relation to problematizing questions (Steedman, 2000). Methods were designed to enable participants to tell their own lives, and each participant was interviewed on three occasions using a multimethod approach designed to build a "mosaic" of understanding (Clark, 2004). This qualitative longitudinal approach allowed exploration of "complex timescapes

or flows of time" (Neale, Henwood, & Holland, 2012, p. 5), addressing biographical time, as participants looked back and forwards through their lives, as well as the quotidian temporalities of everyday lives. The first interview gathered information about participants' current living situation and involved completion of a life chart addressing four domains (living situation, family, education and employment, and free time). Participants were then given a digital camera, and asked to take photos for a week that would show what mattered to them in their everyday life; they were also asked if they would be willing to choose a piece of music to share, selecting something with positive associations that would help show what is important to them in their lives (following from Wilson, 2013). At least a week later, the second interview was focused on discussion of participants' photographs and music choices, before ending with questions about expectations for the future. Twelve months later, participants were invited for a third interview, which was focused on their account of the last year, and incorporated a future life chart (drawing on Thomson & Holland, 2002; Worth, 2011), addressing the same domains as the life chart in Interview 1. Across the study as a whole, analysis followed a thematic case-based approach, attending to the particularity of individual experiences over time, before looking across cases first within and then across countries to identify cross-cutting themes. For the purposes of this article, I focus on six cases from England—Natalie, Daniel, Frank, Jo, Rebecca, and William (all pseudonyms)—selected to illuminate key themes in relation to meanings of family.[1]

Thinking Beyond "Contact" About Meanings of "Family"

Policy approaches to work with families of children in care must be understood in the context of wider national frameworks for family policy and child welfare; "social, political, economic and systemic contexts matter for why and how decisions are made" (Burns, Pösö, & Skivenes, 2017, p. 2). In considering what that decision making—whether, where, when, and how children are "placed"—means for experience of "family," Morgan's (2011) observations about the central importance of temporality and spatiality seem particularly relevant. When a child is placed in out-of-home care, meanings of family in their quotidian lives and over the life course will be shaped by possibilities for placement (including adoption, kinship, or unrelated foster family placements or residential placements), as well as policy and practice approaches to permanence in placement and to birth family involvement. Thus, policy shapes the quotidian *and* life course experience of "family" for children and young people who encounter care systems.

Continuity, Permanence, and Temporality

All the countries in *Beyond Contact*—including England—had policy and legislative frameworks that stipulated continuing involvement of birth families in children's lives after a placement was made, but there were differences in emphasis and in direction of policy travel (Boddy et al., 2014). In particular, England differs from the other countries in the extent to which adoption is used (see also Skivenes & Thoburn, 2016). In the other countries in *Beyond Contact*, most adoptions are of children in overseas countries, and domestic adoptions are usually "partner" adoptions by stepparents. In France, Halifax and Villeneuve-Gokalp (2005) reported that more than 90% of adoptions were from overseas, and the proportion of domestic adoptions was said to be declining. Just 13 Danish born children were anonymously adopted in 2016, while in the Netherlands there were just 34 domestic adoptions in 2012; in England in 2016, 4,690 children were adopted from care.[2]

Variation in use of adoption forms a critical part of the policy frame within which "family" (and understandings of "permanence" and continuity in family relationships) is conceptualized for children in care. The *Beyond Contact* study revealed tensions across countries between understandings of children's rights and their "best interests," including their need for continuity in relationships. Ubbesen (2013, p. 18) observed that continuity "does not have a stable meaning" within policy, describing a shift in Danish policy over the past 20 years, from a focus on the child's relationships with birth parents—with concomitant emphasis on work toward reunification (return to the birth family home) and maintenance of parental involvement during placement—toward greater emphasis on the child's relationships with significant others (such as foster carers) while in the placement. Backe-Hansen, Højer, Sjöblom, and Storø (2013) note similar tensions in Norwegian policy: a European Court of Human Rights decision in 1996 ruled that Article 8 (protection of family life) was judged to have been violated in a case involving the forced adoption of a girl, but more recently, the Ministry of Child and Welfare Equality has encouraged child welfare agencies to consider whether adoption might be in the best interests of the child. This discussion also raises a question about the *temporality* of policy objectives for "permanence" and continuity in relationships: is the concern for the duration of the placement, for childhood, or for the life course?

Birth Family Involvement

In France, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands, policy has increasingly prioritized work with birth families—whether in terms of their continued

involvement and responsibilities for children who are placed, or through intervention to address the problems that led to placement (Geurts, Boddy, Noom, & Knorth, 2012). The most recent Dutch legislation, the Child and Youth Act 2015, frames mandatory intervention as a last resort, an intervention into the "right and duty" of parents to bring up their children (Hilverdink, Daamen, & Vink, 2015). Parental rights are also emphasized in France, where high rates of court-ordered placements partly reflect an understanding that placement is a very serious intervention into the constitutional principle (set out in the Code Civil) of the "absolutisme" of parental authority (Observatoire National de l'Enfance en Danger, 2013). In the Netherlands and Denmark, birth family involvement is framed as a right for the child, in terms of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the child's right to family life. In Denmark, for example, children have a right to "samvær"—a concept which goes beyond "contact," meaning literally "being together"—with parents and the wider family network, including siblings. Examples identified in our research—such as shared meals, watching TV together, and birth family participation in occasional activities in the placement such as Christmas dinner—imply a boundary-crossing conceptualization of togetherness that is not only about the child's link with the birth family but also brings the birth family together with the (residential or foster care) placement through practices of everyday family life.

In England, statutory guidance for the primary child welfare legislation, the Children Act 1989, places "strong emphasis" on work in partnership with birth parents, stating that

> Parents should be expected and enabled to retain their responsibilities and to remain as closely involved as is consistent with their child's welfare, even if that child cannot live at home either temporarily or permanently. (Department for Education, 2015, p. 13)

But there has been a shift in policy travel over recent years, coinciding with increased policy emphasis on adoption as a route to permanence. The statutory duty to promote contact between children and their birth parents, "unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with his/her welfare" (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p. 3) has been removed in the Children and Families Act 2014, which instead requires that the local authority considers "whether contact [. . .] is consistent with safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare." Concern about the need to safeguard children during contact, and to attend to the nature and quality of attachments between children and significant adults, is well-established in cross-national literature (e.g., Schofield & Simmonds, 2011 in England; Berger, 2007 in France; and Klyvø, 2011 in

Denmark, both cited in Boddy et al., 2013). Larkins et al. (2015, p. 310) highlight the need for "a delicate balance that does not counterpose children's rights to participation or contact against rights to safety or stability." Decisions about family members' involvement in children's lives need to recognize the complexity and dynamism of kin relationships as well as the continuing importance of the "multiple families" in children's lives (Cossar & Neil, 2013, p. 74). Cossar and Neil (2013) were discussing postadoption contact with birth families, but their comments are even more relevant for the majority of children in care, as most placements in England are not designed to provide a legally permanent "new family" and are not focused on long-term care and upbringing (Thoburn & Courtney, 2011). Rather than conceptualizing placement as the replacement of one family unit with another, it may be more useful to understand placement as a form of family reconfiguration. In the words of Zartler (2011), discussing family configuration after divorce:

> each of them has to draw new lines of inclusion or exclusion with regard to the question: who is (still) part of *my* family? (p. 181)

The examples given here also highlight the need for policy and practice to address the different dimensions of time in child and family lives, not restricted to the "practical time" of the present day. This issue was raised by several professional stakeholders in the *Beyond Contact* study, including a senior manager in an English nongovernmental organization who had visited service providers elsewhere in Europe:

> I think in this country, we are more ready to stop contact—e.g., if a child is upset by the contact, or a parent turns up drunk. That's problematic, because the relationship remains, even if contact stops—so it could be storing trouble for later. The work needs to address the relationship.

Studies of family life across generations in Europe have consistently shown how important parental and family responsibilities extend far beyond childhood or the period of transition around leaving home (e.g., Nilsen, Brannen, & Lewis, 2012). Such findings are equally relevant for understanding family for young adults who have been in care. Wade's (2008) study of care leavers in England found that 80% were in contact with birth families, usually siblings and birth mothers; he concluded that "it is important that the maintenance of positive family links is kept continuously in mind throughout the time a young person is looked after" (p. 52). His observations raise a crucial question about the *time frame* for thinking about the child's welfare and best interests in relation to work with families. As McCarthy et al. (2013) observe:

> it is also important to avoid using children's best interests in a way that assumes it is simple to know what they are, and that even when we agree what they are, that they necessarily trump all other considerations. (p. 16)

Do decisions about "best interests" depend on the immediate stability of the placement? Or does thinking about family necessitate a different temporality, recognizing connections (and welfare concerns) that extend beyond childhood? Such questions necessitate attention to the "web of connectedness" in which concepts of self and family are embedded (Smart, 2011, p. 17), as well as more practical implications such as the (re)emergence of young people's caring responsibilities for family after leaving care.

To raise these considerations is not naively to ignore the difficult work that "contact" can entail, or the risk that contact can reexpose children to traumatic experiences. But several participants in *Beyond Contact* noted that avoiding work with families can fail to address young people's needs through childhood and beyond. As a senior Danish policy advisor observed:

> The relationship between placed children and their parents is never static—it is dynamic. It's important that as professionals we never say "good enough" or "not good enough." It is a difficult relationship—and a different sort of relationship.

Her argument is vividly illustrated in the discussions of family emerging in interviews with young adults in the *Against All Odds?* study. Within the space constraints inherent in linking the two studies in this article, the cases discussed in the following section are not selected as *typical* of care leavers or even of our sample; rather, they are chosen to help trouble meanings of "family" for adults who have been in care, and so help understand the (dis)connect between policy and lived experience.

Troubling Meanings of "Family"

Recognizing the "Ordinary"

One problem with thinking about a "different sort of relationship" when we talk about families of children who have been in care is that the analytic focus may tend toward the bourgeois construction of the "suffering and enduring other, using the themes and items of other, dispossessed and difficult lives" (Steedman, 2000, p. 36), and framed in contrast to the "ordinary" family "doing their best" (in the words of U.K. Prime Minister Teresa May, 2016). Undeniably, young people who have been in care have often faced particular hardships in their family lives. But equally striking in our

interviews were mundane accounts of quotidian or habitual family practices. Troubling meanings of "family" for people who have been in care means recognizing what is ordinary *as well as* what is distinctive. Thus, for example, Rebecca described dancing to JLS (a boy band) on X Factor with her brothers on a Saturday night, recalling that "me and my brothers would make up routines to the songs and dance about." Daniel's music choice[3]—which was also his first musical memory—revealed a critical moment (Thomson et al., 2002) that was both highly significant to his identity as a singer, and utterly mundane:

> So the song is the first song I remember hearing besides the Lion King. [. . .] [*song plays*] I was about five-ish, because I was still with my birth mum. And it made me cry, but I didn't really understand why. [. . .] But that song is one of the (. . .) it is the reason that I started to do music (. . .) or started to sing.

As Muxel (1993, p. 193) wrote, "it is with and through memories that the identity of a social subject pieces itself together." Daniel continued with a vivid narrative of the moment of hearing the song:

> My birth mum used to always listen to music anyway, and really, really loud. She loved every type of music pretty much. And I think I was laying in her bed in the morning while she was tidying up and she put this song on. (...) And it was the first time that I'd ever probably sat down and listened to music. And I think within maybe the first 45 seconds I cried I think. Because I distinctly remember it wasn't that far into the song. And then my mum was like, are you OK? And I was like, yeah; I'm fine. I just didn't know why I was crying. I think she knew why I was crying because it was an emotional song, but I don't think I understood why I was crying.

His story illustrates the importance of recognizing that relational identities are situated in moments that may be both significant *and* mundane. Policy discourses of "family" for children in care must acknowledge the importance of the mundane, or risk rendering such experiences invisible in young people's lives.

Shortly before our final interview, when he had recently begun living alone for the first time in his life, Daniel's birth mother unexpectedly gave him a kitten. He was worried about the affordability of vet bills, but he also commented that

> with the cat it definitely feels more like home because I'm not coming home to like an empty flat and I don't have to like just come home and sit all by myself, whereas I can talk to the cat, as crazy as it sounds (*Laughing*).

This (unexpected) gift of a kitten can be understood as a practice of care; it shows the continued importance of the parent–child relationship to Daniel's birth mother, as well as being significant for Daniel in addressing his potential loneliness in a new biographical phase of early adulthood after finishing university. As with Rebecca's account of dancing with her brothers, Daniel's narratives act as a reminder that memories of family are not restricted to problems, or the experience of being "in care."

A Different Sort of Relationship?

The importance—and complexity—of family relationships is a strong theme for participants across all three countries in *Against All Odds?* In Natalie's interviews, she presents what might appear superficially to be contradictory framings of her mother, revealing a "different sort of relationship," in the words of the Danish policy advisor quoted above, and highlighting the importance of considering time and generation in understanding her experiences. Natalie was in her final year of university when we first interviewed her; she entered care when she was about 12 years old, placed with her older sister. She explained the reasons for her placement as arising from her mother's violent partner—who moved in when Natalie was about 8 years old—and their drug and alcohol problems, and she spoke in her first two interviews about the anger she felt toward her mother:

> I was angry at my mum over it happening because, like I said, she was in care herself so she kind of let history repeat itself, so I was really angry with her, so my, like, relationship with her wasn't really that good.

Natalie's mother died when Natalie was 17 years old, and her emotional work in coming to terms with that loss, and with her feelings of anger, was evident in her account. She said,

> I'm looking back on it now and I'm thinking, it must've been so obvious to try and get out of that relationship, but now when I'm thinking about it people find it hard to actually get out of that relationship. So I'm kind of angry at myself for being so angry at my mum, but it's like, the way I seen it, I lost my mum when she was with my little sister's dad.

Alongside this complex story of anger, loss, and regret, when asked who she saw as a role model, Natalie cited her mother:

> For some weird reason [. . .] because my mum was a strong person, and, like (. . .) She went into care, and she didn't have, like, family there but she was a strong person for putting up with stuff she did for such a long time.

She drew a caveat toward the end of this account, commenting that her mother was a role model until Natalie was eight, when "I lost my mum." But elsewhere in her account she also highlighted her mother's strength, in fighting successfully for Natalie to be allowed to go to a mainstream high school on the basis of her academic ability, rather than continuing in the special school she had been moved to previously because of her dyslexia.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Natalie spoke most about her mother in her first interview, while completing her life chart. But in her second interview, she mentioned her mother again, when asked if she had any worries for the future:

> Just me changing really into a person I don't want to be. [. . .] Like it's going back to my mum again. My mum didn't want social workers to be involved with her kids, but because she changed without herself noticing, that's what happened. And she was a lovely woman before she changed. And that's really the only scare I have, in case that happens. [. . .] It's just something I think it could happen to me without me noticing really. And that's what scares me. [. . .] it's not like I'm really worried about it. It's just a little thing . . . in the back of my head. A big part of me goes, well you've seen it and you know you don't want that to happen, so it won't happen. And it's going back to me getting out of that circle. So a part of me is like, well you're going out of that circle so that won't happen. But it's still a little thing in the back of my head that does . . . remind me about the little fear.

Natalie still struggles with her feelings of anger and loss, even as she respects her mother's strength; her "little fear" that what happened to her mother "could happen to me without me noticing really" is vivid, and, she says, always present. Moreover, this fear is not wholly negative in Natalie's telling; she is not "really worried," and she later said that it acts as a reminder to herself, making it less likely that she could repeat her mother's difficulties without noticing.

She spoke just once about her mother in her final interview, which was conducted after she had graduated from her first degree and was about to start a master's program. Asked what had been most important in making a difference to her life, her comments show the significance of her family relationships in understanding her sense of self:

> I think it's just my living conditions really of when I was living with my mum and when I was living with my sister. Because they were both on benefits and my mum and my sister can't drive and they got pregnant at a young age. My older sister got pregnant at the age of 16 and my mum got pregnant with my sister when she was 18. And it was like, when my mum or my dad would take me up to go to bed, when my mum would tuck me up, my mum would be like, you'll be the daughter getting the big house, you'll go to uni and all that. So

> they kind of like drilled that into my head. And I just remember when I was younger I always wanted to go to uni as well.

Natalie's comparison of her mother and sister could be seen to echo her earlier concerns about repeating circles, but she sets it out here as a context for explaining her own distinctive position within the family, which is tied to her academic abilities and aspirations. This is a recurrent theme across all three of her interviews, as in her final interview when she observes that her family cannot understand why she is doing a master's degree:

> But that's just the way my family is because I've got the highest qualification [in the family] already. It's gone to the point where they don't understand and also I have to keep constantly keep explaining it to them.

In highlighting her mother's fight for her to access mainstream secondary education, just as in her memory of being "tucked up" in bed, Natalie's account not only sets out her difference to others in the family, she explains that this distinctiveness comes *from* her family, "drilled" into her head. She describes a sense of self which is partly defined through family memories and relationships that span time and generation, and her account of those relationships shows why it is unhelpful to binarize family (or family members) as "good" or "bad."

A Sense of Connected Selves

The *Beyond Contact* study reported that, across countries, policy and practice discussions of contact tended to focus on the birth mother, neglecting the importance of other family relationships, although there has been some shift in recent years with growing attention to network placement and models such as Family Group Conferencing (e.g., Featherstone, White, & Morris, 2014; Morris, 2012). Attention to wider family relationships is not only important for the practicalities of care and contact arrangements, as evident in the crucial role that Natalie's sister has played in her upbringing. It matters for understanding—and supporting—relational identities for young people. Many participants in the *Against All Odds?* study highlighted the importance of sibling relationships, and often spoke of older siblings' caring responsibilities for younger siblings. In England, Frank, who was 22 years old when first interviewed, chose music that articulated his feelings for his younger sisters[4]:

> This is a song from over the years of me and my sisters. [. . .] They're going to go through dark stages, but they've always got a home here and I'm always going

> to be there. They're my everything. [. . .] It's not just a song about them, it's a song . . . about me and them. It's a song how me and them have both progressed, even though we've been away, apart. [. . .] So it's a very important song. It means a lot to me and the lyrics as well . . . have a meaning to me. [. . .] I don't play it a lot. [. . .] But it's a song that doesn't need to be played a lot, you know. It's like you keep [it].

Frank was a teenager, already living in care, when his sisters were born; he said he visited them frequently to look after them, changing nappies, bathing, and feeding them. They were eventually placed in foster care, but he said he feels they are alive now because of the care he gave them and he still regularly spends time with them. Like Daniel, he had a vivid memory of first hearing the song, hearing it in a film soundtrack and immediately looking it up on YouTube:

> and as soon as it started playing I immediately thought about my sisters and I immediately thought about the people that I've lost in my life. [. . .] And that's when I knew. Everyone has their song for themselves. [. . .] Instantly it was that song; straightaway because it's true.

As with Daniel, the vivid memory reveals the significance of the moment: for Frank, this involved hearing his story in the song, as he explained by drawing on the lyrics:

> We have (. . .) us three, we have come a long way from where we began. And I will tell them all about it (. . .) when I see them again.

In choosing this song, and highlighting the "long way" that he and his sisters have travelled, Frank uses a life course perspective to center his relationship with his sisters in his account of himself, foregrounding his identity as a brother. Interviews within other *Against All Odds?* participants also highlighted their positioning in family as central to their identity; for Rebecca, this was literally displayed through a tattoo of the word "family."

People in our sample had diverse placement experiences; all those discussed so far had memories of life with their birth families prior to placement, and to varying degrees, all had contact with birth family members after they were placed. Birth family connections are part of their childhood memories and, especially (but not only) for Daniel and Natalie who were both in kinship placements, an ongoing part of their everyday lives. William, who was 32 years old when we interviewed him, had a very different experience. He entered care as a toddler and grew up in a long-term foster placement; he

lived with his biological siblings but had very little other contact with his birth family. At the time of our first phase of interviews, William was trying to learn more about his birth family, including his mother who is no longer alive. He took a photograph to show how "family" is positioned in his sense of self (Figure 1), with an account that evokes Smart's (2011) conceptualization of the imaginary as a resource for making meaning:

> I was just walking down the road and I looked up and it looks like there's two moons. This is the [street]light. So it looks like there's two worlds. [. . .] So this is like, this is the [street]light which is man-made by a person. For me that is about my foster family [. . .] I don't know where that [actual] moon is, and I can't get there cos it's . . . you'd need a rocket to get up there. You can't touch it. I can see it—it's there! *(laughs)* I can see it but I can't be there. [. . .] I'm happy not to get there, but I'm happy to see it. I'm happy to see it as much as I can, and think about it and write about it and look at it. [. . .] This is a person who was raised, by people. The nurture is here *(streetlight)* and my nature's here *(moon)*. [. . .] And that's who I am right now.

"Family" as Multifaceted and Dynamic

In the cases presented thus far, extracts have been chosen to foreground particular dimensions or conceptualizations of "family." But "family" is multifaceted and dynamic, and these complex elements shift and intertwine through time and space, as the everyday links past, present, and imagined futures (Morgan, 2011). This is illuminated by the diverse meanings of family encapsulated by Jo, who was 27 years old when we first interviewed her; considered as a whole, her account is emblematic of the multiple ways in which family can be recognized and practiced through time.

Jo entered care aged 11 years, placed with a family friend. The placement meant that Jo stayed in her local area—ensuring continuity in terms of schooling, for example—but she also had continuing contact with mother, and Jo described the difficulties that posed for her as a child. She said that when she was younger:

> like I always wanted to go back to my mum. And my aims in life was to get a good job, [and] put her in rehab so she could be my mother again. [. . .] And even growing up that was what I wanted to do, "cos I knew she wasn't well."

Over time, however, their relationship deteriorated, and this was in part associated with her mother's repeated suicide attempts, which, Jo said, her mother blamed on the children.

Figure 1. William's photograph: "Two Moons."

Jo lost contact with her dad when she was just 3 years old, and, on her life chart she recorded finding him again, aged 16 years. Again, her account reveals a vivid memory of this critical moment:

> I can remember it completely, 'cos I was in the living room umm sat on the floor doing something or other and the phone had rang, and [*foster mother*] had picked up, or was it [*foster father*]. Either one of them, and then they'd had a conversation, and had passed the phone over to me, and then I was like [*excited noise*]. [. . .] and they said, oh it's your grandma, umm so I spoke to her and then two minutes later my dad rang, and I spoke to him on the phone.

Jo said that finding her father, "probably saved my life to be honest, because I was very depressed then [. . .] It gave me somewhere to escape to" from a foster home that was often "chaotic." However, she also suggested it

contributed to the subsequent breakdown of her foster placement, despite her foster carers having been the ones to find her father. She said of her foster placement that

> I never felt, as a child growing up, that I belonged there. [. . .] Because my mum had rejected me, so I didn't feel like anybody kind of wanted me, but then, I found my dad, and to me that was the perfect family.

After making contact with her father, Jo spent holidays and Christmases with him, and she reflected, with hindsight, that her foster carers must have found this hurtful.

As Jo continued mapping her life chart in the first interview, further complexity in her understanding of "family" was revealed. Aged 23 years and in the last year of an undergraduate degree, she regained contact with the man who had been her stepfather (in early childhood) and his son, her half-brother, who was in his early teens. A short-time later Jo's stepfather died, "and I'd made a promise to look after [her half-brother]." She managed to finish university, but then her brother "just came to live with me." She described this period as really difficult, in part because "I'd not parented before," but it was also marked by significant financial hardship; Jo's older brother moved in to help, but could not find work, and she supported all three of them on her limited salary. Jo's younger brother had significant mental health difficulties and she gave a detailed account of struggles in trying to manage his care and access professional support. Jo said the situation pushed her to "breaking point," triggering a significant episode of reactive depression. Her experience echoes Becker, Aldridge, and Dearden's (1998) observation that young people often take on caring roles because there is no alternative, highlighting Jo's (unmet) need for practical and emotional support in managing her family relationships.

By the time of our interviews, people who were important in Jo's earlier life continued to be so, in predictable and less predictable ways. Her relationship with her mother remained very challenging, and by our third interview they had limited contact. Jo explained,

> And I had spoken to her last year as well and said, look, if you're going to send me these emotionally manipulative messages I'm not going to reply, I'm not going to have communications with you. It's not going to work like that. Which is hard to say to your mum, that actually, you're not my mum.

Jo's relationship with her younger brother was also still challenging; by the time of her third interview he was living with her former foster carers, and

she said, "I'm trying to kind of get him to . . . think of me more as a sister than a mum, but it's hard . . . it's a difficult one." It is of note, however, that in her first interview she cited this relationship as something in her life of which she was particularly proud. Her relationship with her father remained very positive, and she described him as a role model for his ability to get through very difficult situations with compassion. In her first interview, she said she had supported him through challenging recent times; he also had gone to university and she joked "I paid for his official graduation pictures—I was his parent." By the time of our first interviews, Jo had also restored the relationship with her foster mother, which had broken down in her late teens, to the extent that, when we first interviewed her, she was helping prepare for the foster mother's wedding:

> I'm doing a load of the decorations. I've made about 4 or 5 meters of hearts, like of foil hearts that I've made into a chain, and then I've been making loads of paper pompoms. So I've got loads to make.

Jo's account of the family rituals of wedding preparations and graduation photos is one of the ways in which she displays family (Finch, 2007), although the fact that she is doing this as a child for two of the parent figures in her life is striking. Over her life, Jo also developed new relationships that she also described as family. The parent of a college friend, she described as her chosen mum, and she joked in her first interview that "she knows she is my mum-mum." She lived with them for a few months at one stage, and her "mum-mum" helped Jo choose her wedding dress. Of the wedding itself, Jo said:

> she was just the superstar of the weekend. There's some pictures of her here as well. So she did the mum thing. [. . .] she did the mum pictures and . . . [. . .] And she gave me a foot massage on the Saturday as well when I couldn't walk any more.

This account, from her third interview, tells of the other key change in Jo's family relationships—her marriage. At the time of our first interviews, she was living with her partner and his parents while they saved for a house, and she jokingly described their pets as their "furry children"; by the final interview, Jo and her husband were in their new home, with "real space to ourselves," establishing the habitual practices of their new family life as "us":

> So we choose what's on our television, we choose when we clean up; we choose when we do the washing. Sometimes washing up does get left for a

> couple of days, but that's just life and it's fun. We don't feel like we're in someone's way if we've left washing up out or there's a pile of washing that hasn't been tidied. It's just not in our routine to have it all done in one day. We've got a lot going on. So it's nice. We just make it fit around us and our lives.

Within the sample, Jo's account is not unusual in the number and variety of relationships that mean "family" to her. Taken as a whole, her description of family meanings and practices shows relationships that are both positive and challenging, supportive yet also needing support. The distinctions she draws—such as "not my mum" and "chosen mum"—correspond with McCarthy's (2012, p. 85) observations about the ways in which the language of "family" and family relationships is "invoked precisely to convey that they comprise 'something more' than a network of relational individuals, which other terms fail to capture."

Other participants also told stories of family rituals, for example, in weddings and Christmases, and used the language of "family" as part of their family display. In her third interview, Rebecca showed photographs from the wedding of her foster carers' biological son, pointing out that she was the only one of the family's foster children to attend the wedding. Now 19 years old, Rebecca had lived with the same foster family since entering care at the age of 13. In her first interview, she said she was not looking for a "replacement family" at that time, commenting that

> I couldn't have someone trying to be my family, you know, if somebody said, "This is your new family," I'd be like, "No, you're fucking not," I'd be really highly offended if someone said that to me.

Yet, she observed that over the years, her foster family had come to mean "family" too, commenting that, "when I first came in care they weren't . . . I wasn't looking for a family but actually they really are part of my family now." Her account again shows the significance of time, through what Wilson et al. (2012, p. 125) term a "boundary move," shifting the parameters of family; as these authors note, it is important to recognize the emotional significance of such shifts, highlighted here by Rebecca's linguistic turn from "no, you're fucking not" to "actually they really are."

Conclusions

Families are complicated, diverse in their structures and in their practices (Morgan, 2011). This is of course true for *any* family, and it is just as

misleading to homogenize the "ordinary" family as it is for those families defined as troubling, including families of those who have been "in care" (see also Wilson et al., 2012). Some of the family stories highlighted here could be seen as particular to experiences associated with placement in care—such as Frank and Natalie's accounts of the ways in which different forms of loss connect with relational identities, or William's depiction of his birth and foster family as his "Two Moons"—although their accounts have resonance with other experiences of family reconfiguration or loss (e.g., Zartler, 2011). Other examples might equally have come from studies of "ordinary" family lives and practices, such as Jo's account of wedding preparations, or Daniel's story of watching his mother tidy her bedroom. These aspects of family lives coexist for young people through time in ways that reified—and binarizing—policy conceptualizations of family cannot possibly address.

The interviews analyzed here show how "family" in all its diversity forms part of dynamic and relational identities in care, when leaving care and into adult life. Relationships may simultaneously be experienced as positive and negative, supportive, and concerning—and may feel more or less like family over time, as when Rebecca describes her foster carers becoming family, or in the distinction Jo draws between her biological and chosen mother. The experiences of the young adults discussed here lend weight to Edwards et al.'s (2012) argument about the continuing relevance of the concept of family for social policy, while simultaneously revealing why policy constructs such as "contact" and "permanence" can obscure the structural and emotional complexity of family lives. The research also shows why policy makers and service providers must think beyond childhood, when considering what family means for the welfare and best interests of the child. "Family" matters to young people in manifold ways, and is practiced in multiple ways across time and in multiple (and changing) contexts—spanning the "the run of the mill affectivity of everyday social life, and moments of extraordinary emotional drama" (Wetherell, 2015, p. 161).

Authors' Note

While the analysis and views presented in this article are my own, both projects have been carried out in conjunction with colleagues: June Statham, Hélène Join-Lambert, Esther Geurts, Inge Danielsen, and Severine Euillet on *Beyond Contact*; and on *Against All Odds?* Elisabeth Backe-Hansen, who is Principal Investigator, Fidelma Hanrahan, Jeanette Østergaard, Elisiv Bakketeig, Tonje Gundersen, Mette Lausten, Marianne Dæhlen, Charlie Owen, and Signe Ravn.

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Notes

1. In extracts from transcripts, (. . .) indicates a pause in speech, [. . .] indicates an edit in the quote.
2. *Source*. Statbank Danmark (http://www.statbank.dk/ADOP4); Netherlands Statistics (http://statline.cbs.nl/StatWeb/publication/?DM=SLNL&PA=80399NED&D1=1-2&D2=a&D3=0&D4=l&HDR=T,G2&STB=G1,G3&VW=T), and Department for Education, England (https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2015-to-2016).
3. Daniel's music choice was "I Believe I Can Fly" by R. Kelly (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIQn8pab8Vc).
4. Frank's music choice was "See You Again" by Whiz Khalifa featuring Charlie Puth (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgKAFK5djSk).

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